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Reliving the Tragic Bay of Pigs

The Race of the Inside Stories

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On April 16, 1961, as President Kennedy agonized over the Bay of Pigs invasion poised to begin that night, Vice-President Lyndon Johnson was entertaining Konrad Adenauer over barbecued pork ribs at the LBJ ranch in Texas.

"Der Alte" posed incongruously for pictures in a cowboy hat, sampled the beef and beans and "six shooter" coffee, chatted with Mr. Johnson's German-stock neighbors, and appeared to have a fine time. The next day, the West German Chancellor was addressing the legislature in Austin, as the Cuban exile brigade was storming ashore at the Bay of Pigs.

It is because Mr. Johnson was host to the West German statesman that his name does not appear in any of the accounts of the historic events of that week end, which shifted back and forth from frantic conferences in Washington to President Kennedy at Glen Ora, his estate in the Middleburg, Va. hunt country.

As events transpired, Mr. Johnson was well out of it. His name has never been linked with the worst disaster of the Kennedy administration, although he was the second-ranking official of the government at the time.

During the past week, the Bay of Pigs was relived all over again, as two of President Kennedy's trusted aids, and two national magazines, raced each other to see who would be first with the inside story of the lowest point in the history of the New Frontier.

Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger won, with his account in *Life* on Monday, which appeared two days before Theodore Sorensen's version in *Look*. But Mr. Sorensen, perhaps the late President's closest confidant, will be first in the hard-cover race.

His book, "Kennedy," from which the article is excerpted, will be published on Oct. 5 by Harper & Row. It sells for \$10, and is a Book of the Month club selection for October. Mr. Schlesinger's book, "A Thousand Days," will be published by Houghton Mifflin in November at \$8.50. It is Book of the Month for December.

A third voice, taking a somewhat different approach, was heard on Tuesday in the form of an interview in the Washington Evening Star with Richard Bissell Jr., the former top Central Intelligence Agency official who ran the Bay of Pigs operation for the CIA.

The Schlesinger and Sorensen accounts, which do not disagree in their essentials, prompted one official in the Johnson White House staff to write a parody last week.

The official wrote that he, too, was an intimate of President Kennedy—so intimate in fact, that the other intimates did not know of his existence.

He would talk with Mr. Kennedy after the other intimates had left.)

In the spoof, the official claims that in a confidential conversation with President Kennedy, the late Chief Executive explained that he had deliberately staged the Bay of Pigs invasion as a blunder in order to bring about the Cuban crisis in which the Russians were defeated, thereby changing the tide of the cold war.

So be it. But the satire aside, the Schlesinger, Sorensen and Bissell accounts add up to a fascinating glimpse inside the corridors of power, and a terrifying view of distinguished leaders stumbling toward disaster.

That President Kennedy learned it is clear from Mr. Sorensen's revealing quote:

"All my life I've known better than to depend on the experts," he recalls President Kennedy as saying. "How could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead?"

Mr. Sorensen's story, less anecdotal and personal than Mr. Schlesinger's, nevertheless drives to the very heart of the Cuban disaster. His central conclusions are these:

The Bay of Pigs operation was approved by Mr. Kennedy as a clandestine invasion. It did not turn out to be, because the CIA's "cover story" fell apart. Mr. Kennedy, because the cat was rapidly emerging from the

bag, canceled a second exile air strike against Castro's bases. He did so in the belief that the world would have viewed it as a U. S.-directed bombing raid.

He did not, according to Mr. Sorensen, openly commit the U.-S. Navy and Air Force to insure the success of the invasion because he had ruled out such intervention in advance, and because the whole idea was a covert invasion, not a U. S. invasion. As Mr. Sorensen puts it, "had the U. S. Navy and Air Force been openly committed, no defeat would have been permitted" and in that case, "there was no point in beginning with a Cuban brigade in the first place."